

## **“Look for the Helpers”: Children’s Books Highlighting the Role of Love in Scary Times**

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School shootings. Bomb threats. Lockdown drills. Natural disasters. Political disputes. Racially-motivated hate crimes. The list of scary things that children might see on the news or hear about at school goes on and on. It is particularly frightening for young children to watch their caregivers express fear and uncertainty and not have answers. In this issue of *First Opinions, Second Reactions*, we decided to review five picture books that might have some answers, or at least pose productive questions, for conversations about what to do during “scary times.”

This list of books is inspired in part by Fred Rogers, whose talks with young children often centered on the acknowledgement and amelioration of their fears. Mr. Rogers explains, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”

These books “look for the helpers” in different ways. We believe love plays a central role in scary times and sought out books that describe love’s role in today’s difficult world.

Our collection of books begins with what it’s like to see bad news in the media. Alexandra Panos and Regina Weir review *The Breaking News* by Sarah Lynne Reul, a storybook about what it feels like when adults are overwhelmed by frightening news and the impact this has on the children around them. The practical message for readers in the end is this: scary news can feel overwhelming, but we can still make a better world in our own homes and communities through small, personal acts of love and kindness.

Next, our collection of books turns to two specific examples of how helpers engage when tragedy strikes. Cassie Brownell reviews *Marvelous Cornelius: Hurricane Katrina and the Spirit of New Orleans* by Phil Bildner. This story is based on a real person, Cornelius Washington, who was a sanitation worker and notable community member in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Bildner’s book describes the positive impact Washington made on the city of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Then, Kristin Cipollone and Kate Shively review *Something Happened in Our Town*, a book about a police shooting in a black community written by Marietta Collins and Ann Hazzard, both clinical psychologists, and Marianne Celano, a family psychologist. All three are employed at the Emory University School of Medicine except for Hazzard, who recently retired. They all specialize in group therapy for children and teens. Both reviewers recommend pre-reading the book and its accompanying resources in order to engage children in a conversation about racial justice, rather than simply reading the book cold.

Our collection of books rounds out with two titles that explore what it means to engage with love in the real world, often in messy and imperfect ways. Julie Rust and Sharon Daley

review *Love* by Matt De La Peña—which Rust deems a “book-song” about the unequivocal, omnipresent, and complicated forms love takes across a lifespan. Finally, Taraneh Matloob and Allison Segarra Hansen review *After the Fall (How Humpty Dumpty Got Back Up Again)* by Dan Santat. Santat describes his book as a “love letter” to his wife because of her battle with anxiety. This book chronicles what happens to the egg after it is broken to pieces and makes an eventual comeback. Segarra Hansen complicates such “grittiness” in her review noting, “That’s great for Humpty, but is it realistic for our students who have experienced trauma?”

Children need resources and open, trusted adults to process scary breaking news. It is our hope that these book titles enable proactive conversations with children when they wonder about safety in “scary times.”

### **Works Cited**

- Rogers, Fred. “Parent Resources: Tragic Events.” *Fred Rogers Productions*, <https://www.fredrogers.org/parents/special-challenges/tragic-events.php>
- Santat, Dan. “One Question with Dan Santat.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Colby Sharp, 26 Sept. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8K1ZvNIEeg>